

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR SPRING 2023

NARRATIVE NON-FICTION: ADVENTURES IN PRINT

Coordinators: Judy Goldman, Eileen Hanley, Tom Sear, Eileen Sullivan and Aileen Gitelson (organizer)

Do you just shake your head when someone suggests that you read a non-fiction book? This study group hopes to change your mind. We read and discuss unique non-fiction books with story lines and characters that easily compete with the intrigue and excitement of fiction. This semester the four books we read are written by prize winning authors whose topics will rivet your attention. The quality of the writing is rivaled only by the compelling stories these authors tell. These are books that will surprise you and challenge your assumptions and have you cheering for protagonists and hissing at the villains. The LP² members who are coordinating these books are committed to lively, engaging and thought-provoking discussions. Book titles and descriptions are below.

Judy Goldman has coordinated and co-coordinated many study groups ranging from *Movies of the Sixties* and *Philip Guston: Barometer of 20th Century Art* to *The Bible from Joshua through Kings*. Most recently she was a coordinator for the *New Yorker Profile* study group.

Eileen Hanley, a retired RN and health care executive, has been a member of LP² since Fall of 2018 and has served on the Advisory Board in addition to several other LP² committees and volunteer activities. She has coordinated study groups on *Great Speeches*, the Noble Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro and has coordinated twice before (*Say Nothing*, *After the Last Border*) for the Narrative Non-Fiction study group.

Tom Sear was at various times a U.S. Marine, a federal prosecutor, a law school professor and a trial lawyer in private practice. He has regularly coordinated study groups, including ones on Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt. Most recently he was a coordinator for the *New Yorker Profile* study group and for the *Reel Rock & Roll* study group.

Eileen Sullivan (Ph.D. Columbia University) has coordinated many study groups. Her book *The Shamrock and the Cross: Irish American Novelists Shape American Catholicism* was published by Notre Dame University Press in 2016 and she is hoping that her current interest in the literature of pandemics will lead to another book—or at least to a decent article.

Aileen Gitelson (organizer) is a social worker who has worked in hospitals and community-based agencies that serve older adults. She has previously co-coordinated two study groups, *The Harlem Renaissance* and *Soviet*

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Jewish Writers, and was the organizer of The New Yorker Art of the Profile study group and of the Fall 2022 Narrative Non-Fiction study group.

Type of Study Group: Mostly discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea by Barbara Demick, (originally published in 2009; 2015 edition available in paperback Random House and on Kindle, 338 pages).

For generations it has been next to impossible to get current, truthful, and accurate information about daily life in N. Korea. Even today in our world of instantaneous information and access, N. Korea remains an enigma. The author, a former reporter and Bureau Chief in Beijing and Seoul for the Los Angeles Times tells the history of North Korea following the Civil War through the personal stories of 6 citizens whose families have lived within this repressive regime and covers the period between 1953 to 2015. This book offers a detailed view of what life has been like for the citizens of N. Korea and how their feelings about their homeland have evolved over time. Coordinated by Eileen Hanley.

The Writing of the Gods: The Race to Decode the Rosetta Stone by Edward Dolnick (published in 2021 by Scribner, available on Kindle and on November 22, 2022 available in paperback, 336 pages).

In this account of one of the greatest breakthroughs in archaeological history, two rival geniuses race to decode the writing on one of the world's most famous documents—the Rosetta Stone. *The Writing of the Gods* chronicles this high-stakes intellectual race in which the winner would win glory for both himself and his nation. A portrait of empires both ancient and modern, this is both a look at the culture and history of ancient Egypt, and is also a lesson in what the human mind does when faced with a puzzle. Coordinated by Judy Goldman.

American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic by Nancy K. Bristow (2012, Oxford University Press, available in paperback and on Kindle; 305 pages, including notes); *Afterward 2022* “The Practices

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of Social Forgetting: Rewriting, Obscuring and Silencing the 1918 Influenza Epidemic in the US” (10 pages).

American Pandemic, written in 2012, is a social and cultural history of the 1918 influenza pandemic, addressing questions about the experience of the millions of Americans who endured the cataclysm. How did the pandemic (erroneously called the Spanish Flu) affect the private lives of patients, caregivers and witnesses? Was the pandemic reflected in the art or literature of the time? How did public health and medical professionals respond and how did citizens react to their recommendations? *American Pandemic* is also a contribution to historiography, asking why the pandemic was largely forgotten in American histories over the succeeding decades. In her 2022 *Afterward* (and in several lectures available on YouTube), Bristow compares the 1918 experience with our more recent pandemic and again reflects on the processes of public remembering and forgetting.
Coordinated by Eileen Sullivan

The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family and Defiance During the Blitz by Eric Larsen (2020, Crown Press, available in paperback and on Kindle, 503 pages, excluding Sources and Acknowledgements, Bibliography and Index.)

On Winston Churchill’s first day as prime minister Adolf Hitler invaded much of Europe and the Dunkirk evacuation was just two weeks away. For the next 12 months Hitler waged a relentless bombing campaign, killing 45,000 Britons. It was up to Churchill to hold his country together and teach the country “the art of being fearless.” *The Splendid and the Vile* is the story of political brinkmanship, but it’s also an intimate domestic drama. Drawing on diaries, original archival documents, and once-secret intelligence reports, Larson provides a new lens on London’s darkest year through the day-to-day experience of Churchill and his family.
Coordinated by Tom Sear.

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

WEEK 1

TOPIC: *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* by Barbara Demick

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The Kim Il-sung years (1953-1994)

READINGS:

“Author’s Notes” through Chapter 6 (up to page 102)

QUESTIONS:

How would you describe the various forms of Government propaganda and which do you find most disturbing? Who is the intended audience? Are these measures effective? How would you explain the dramatic descent of the country from a wealthy industrialized nation to its state following the war? We learn of the role that ancestry and affiliations play within NK. How would you describe it? How does this system benefit those in power? Are citizens able to make accommodations for their place in society? How?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, by Barbara Demick

Kim Jong-il years (1994-2011)

READINGS: Chapters 7-13 (pgs. 103-197)

QUESTIONS:

NK suffered a terrible famine in the 90’s. What factors led to this and what was the impact on NK society? How did the famine years change the role of men and women in NK society? How do you explain the devotion of the NK citizens toward their leaders?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, by Barbara Demick
Defections & North Korea today

READINGS:

Chapter 14 through “The Third Generation” (pgs.198-299)

QUESTIONS:

What effect has defection had on the various characters? How have they made the transition to a less restricted culture /society? The author describes NK not as an undeveloped country but as “a country that has fallen out of the developed world.” What do you think she means? Do you agree with her? What surprised or shocked you the most about life in NK? How did the author’s writing style affect your opinion of the book? How would you have told the story differently? What emotions did the book elicit in you?

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WEEK 4 to 6: *The Writing of the Gods: The Race to Decode the Rosetta Stone*

WEEK 7 to 9: *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza*

WEEK 10 to 12: *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family and Defiance During the Blitz*